

Sustainability Initiatives of Student Council Organizations in UPLB: An Analysis of their Contribution in Advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract

Student council formations played a critical niche in shaping the political ecosystem of the University of the Philippines. Within the context of the environment and natural resources, UP student councils have been steadfast on pressing issues concerning mining, militarization of ancestral domains, coastal reclamation, and sectors disproportionately affected by ecological problems. Anchored in Robert Dahl's interest group framework, the study recognizes the role of student council formations and campus-based alliances in conceptualizing nodes of pressure for the attainment of sustainable development goals (SDGs). This study aims to determine the initiatives of student council organizations in UPLB that contribute to advancing SDGs. Under an exploratory sequential research design, the study employed a qualitative (archival data analysis and participant observation) and quantitative phase (descriptive statistics and semi-structured surveys). Results of the study revealed how UPLB-based student council programs gear towards SDG #16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) as a locus of emphasis. As expressed in the mapping distribution of sustainable development goals, activities during the first semester carry a homogenous trend in the platforms of Student Rights and Welfare Week, Peasants' Month Campaign, No to Budget Campaign, and the No to Jeepney Phaseout-related activities. This may be indicative of coexistence between the aforementioned organizations on providing nodes of pressure. Referencing on the results of the thematic analysis, key informant respondents frame the discourse of sustainability within the nexus of the environment. While respondents have a modest level of awareness of the sustainable development goals (median score of 3), student council respondents frame sustainability in an environmental lens; it is critical to recognize how these goals do not exist in a vacuum but are interlinked with one another. Recognizing how social and ecological problems exist in complex settings, the researchers of the study propose the concept of hybrid institutions in the conception of sustainability projects.

Keywords: sustainable development goals, student council formations, interest group, social capital

1. Introduction

Student council organizations within the context of the University of the Philippines play a critical niche in the academic ecosystem. In terms of institutional arrangements, the student council within the settings of UP is considered as an autonomous organization as means to thrust its programs and policy initiatives on pressing

issues which surround inside and outside the university (Palatino, 2008). In university campuses, student councils sought to provide services geared towards student welfare as well as campaigns which sought to address developmental ills in contemporary Philippine society (Manzanilla, 2008). The adoption of the sustainable development goals in the 2015 United Nations General Conference wrought the conception of targets and related indices which recognizes the confluences between human development and the struggle on not compromising ecological integrity (Hák et al., 2016).

This study seeks to investigate the various initiatives undertaken by student council organizations within the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) that contribute to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its primary objective is to comprehensively analyze how these student-led bodies align their work with global sustainability agendas. Specifically, the research aims to identify how SDGs are integrated into the programs and activities of these organizations and to systematically map the outcomes of their projects against the specific targets of the SDG framework. Furthermore, it intends to gauge the level of awareness and understanding of sustainable development among the student council members themselves. The study also strives to identify the practical challenges and barriers these organizations encounter in their efforts to contribute to the SDGs. Ultimately, by examining these facets, the research aims to provide insights and recommendations to strengthen and deepen the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into the core activities and strategic planning of UPLB's student council organizations.

The study focused primarily on the determination of sustainability initiatives of UPLB Student Council Organizations that contribute to the achievement of the global agenda set by the United Nations through SDGs for the past years after its implementation. The study shall only limit to the First Semester of A.Y. 2024 - 2025 student council activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. An overview of sustainable development goals

The concept of sustainability asserts a temporal recognition on not jeopardizing the needs of the present and future generations; under the 1974 World Council of Churches conference the concept of sustainability tackled the following aspects, namely, (i) equal distribution of physical resources, (ii) the opportunity of various actors to engage in social decisions, (iii) capacity to supply food which does not exceed demand, (iv) pollutant emission not exceeding capacities of ecosystems, (v) limitations in utility of nonrenewable resources, and (vi) human activities should not negatively influence global climate variations (Hill, 2012, pp. 2-3).

An integrative approach on understanding Earth's systems is to recognize how the domains of economy, society, and the biosphere exist not as isolated but are interconnected realms (Akhtar et al., 2013). The Stockholm Resilience Center's orientation on the sustainable development goals as targets sought to mobilize communities to achieve desired pathways in the management of commons--- recognizing in the process linkages between social and ecological arrangements. The rhetoric of Stockholm garners similarity to the sustainability discourse of the World Council of Churches (WCC), "Just, Participatory, and Sustainable Society", where the Greek word "oikos" was framed on (i) ecology (the logic of the household), (ii) economy (management of the household), and (iii) ecumenism (co-existence in the household) (Conradie, 2016, p.74).

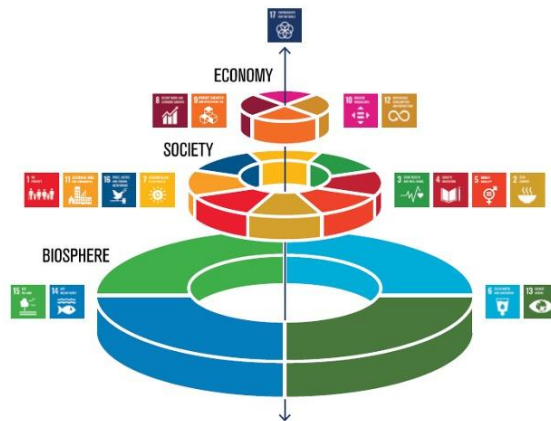


Fig. 1. Sustainable development goals across the three spheres of sustainable development: biosphere, society and economy.
 (Retrieved from Stockholm Resilience Center)

2.2. Theoretical frameworks

Knowledge-deficit model

In environmental psychology, the knowledge-deficit model assumes how human behavior remains unalterable in response to pressing environmental problems by reason of insufficiency in information provision pathways. As means to address such deficit, the following measures for information provision are pursued, namely, (i) goal setting (which involves the process of setting robust targets and commitment to such causes), (ii) concrete procedural plans (information interventions which considers intended measures to reach a particular goal), and (iii) strategic policy (that which is geared in addressing shifting behavior and perception) (Steg et al., 2013, p. 225). Two information typologies are considered to address knowledge-deficit: (i) tailored information (that which is structured to in a particular group of people) and (ii) normative information (that which is based on existing social norms) (Steg et al., 2013, p. 226).



Fig. 2. Addressing knowledge deficit. Adapted from (Abunyewah et al., 2020)

Kurt Lewin's change model

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin's change model recognizes three phases on how change occurs in an organization: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. In a linear fashion, Lewin posits how under the unfreezing

phase organizational behavior has a tendency to be resistant on change as institutional alterations involve challenging path-dependent and traditional arrangements which organizations may have been accustomed to; in the changing phase, Lewin recognizes the need to craft interventions on addressing path-dependency such may include education and awareness campaigns with regards to pressing problems and issues; the last phase which Lewin posits is refreezing: under such arrangements, Lewin argues the need of measures which seeks to cement changes which have been implemented during the "change" phase (Burnes, 2004).

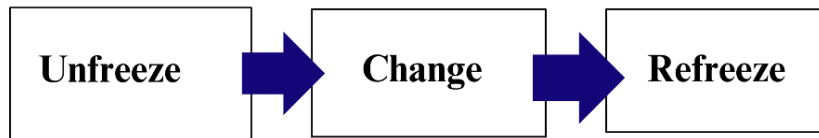


Fig. 3. Kurt Lewin's Change Model. Adapted from (Cummings et al., 2016)

Social Capital

Lyda Honifan defines social capital as mutual sympathy which takes place through social exchanges among individual groups and families which is treated as a social unit. The utility of Honifan's unit has been extended to Pierre Bourdieu's definition on which he frames social capital as an aggregate of potential resources often associated with firm networks built either on mutual acquaintance or recognition (Aldrich and Meyer, 2022; 202). In the lens of Elinor Ostrom, the benefits of social capital are construed as that which enhances the engagement and participation of committed groups having a sense of social belongingness with each other. In order for this to conceptualize, social capital exists in two categories, namely, (i) bonding social capital (which is termed as emotionally and geographically knitted ties; this can include friends, families, as well as established bonds to a specific group) and (ii) binding social capital (that which matures throughout an individual's interaction with civic society, organizations, and associated networks) (Aldrich and Meyer, 2022; 203).

2.3. University of the Philippines student councils and the sustainability discourse: An overview

Filipino historian and University of the Philippines professor, Renato Constantino asserted the need for a university education which seeks to provide "service to fellowmen"; alongside such cause is a conscious struggle in recognizing elements of pressing problems and developmental pathways rooted on arrangements where "people actually live" (Constantino, 2008, pp. 13 - 14). Embodying such ethos, University of the Philippine student councils (SCs) played a critical niche in forwarding radical nodes in the academic threads of UP; student councils have amplified advocacies which considers both student welfare as the broader interests of the Filipino people. Within the context of the environment and natural resources, UP student councils have been steadfast on pressing issues concerning mining, militarization of ancestral domains, coastal reclamation, and sectors disproportionately affected by ecological problems such as farmers and fisherfolk (Palatino, 2008, p. 15).

For instance, the College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences Student Council (CFOSSC) in the University of the Philippines - Visayas has released statements critical to the status of sustainable fisheries and on issues affecting subsistence fisherfolk in Philippine arrangements.

3. Methodology

3.1. Locale of the Study

This case study investigated the awareness of sustainable development practices within the academic setting, focusing on the different student organizations of University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB). UPLB is a prominent educational institution situated in Los Baños, Laguna.

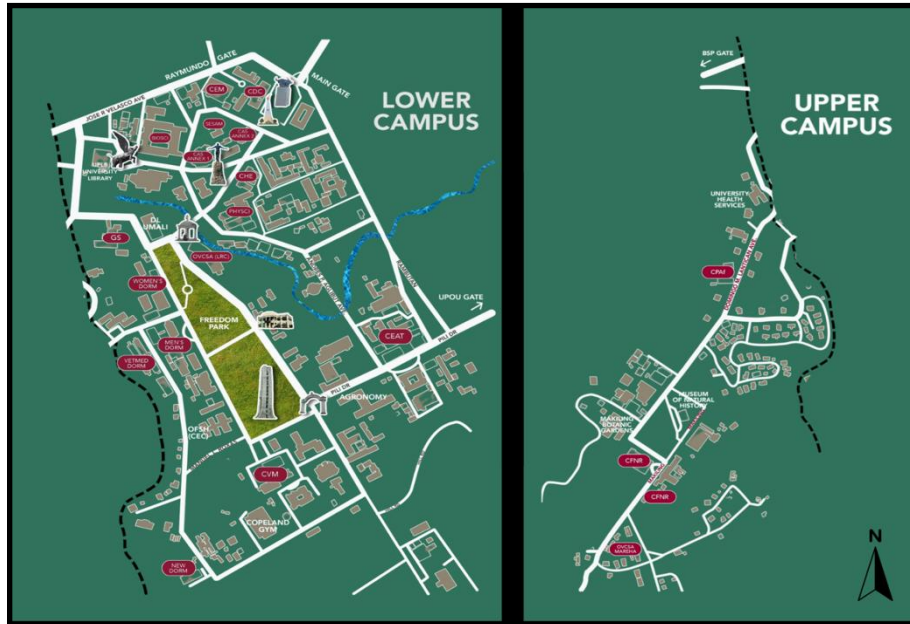


Fig. 4. UPLB-Map Upper and Lower Campus

3.2. Research design

An exploratory sequential research design were pursued by the researchers of the study to critically examine sustainability initiatives of UPLB-based student council formations; under this research design, qualitative data is collected in understanding the phenomenon of interest; a quantitative phase is subsequently pursued to link initial findings (Cresswell and Cresswell, 2018).

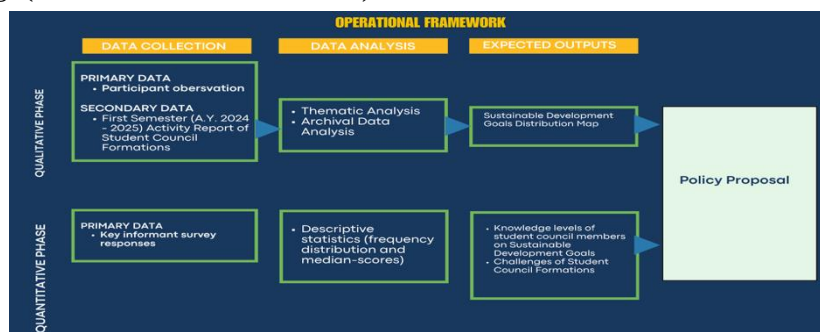


Fig. 5. Operational framework of the study

3.3. Population and Sample

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the environment-related SDG initiatives of the student organizations, purposive sampling was employed for the key informants of this study. Utilizing data obtained from the UPLB-Perspective, as of 2025, it has been identified that there are ten student council organizations present within the campus.

3.4. Research Instrument

The primary tool used to gather data was a semi-structured questionnaire and it was fed in Google form. This structured set of questions was designed to gather the needed information from the respondents.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Part 1 determine the socio-demographic profile, Part 2 determine the level of awareness of student organizations on SDGs, Part 3 identify whether programs and activities of student organizations integrate environment-related SDGs and Part 4 deal with the evaluation and mapping of each activity in terms of its alignment with the identified environment-related SDGs.

For ethical considerations, the respondents were assured about the confidentiality of their data and the information was solely used for research purposes only. Therefore, no personal information, such as names were recorded in the study.

3.5. Data Gathering Procedure

Before the conduct of the study, a letter request was forwarded to the different college deans of UPLB. After the approval, the researchers floated the Google form to answer by the respondents. Archival data analysis from First Semester Activity Reports (A.Y. 2024 - 2025) was utilized in mapping the alignment of council activities to Sustainable Development Goals; participant observation was also pursued on two picket mobilizations led by UPLB-based student council formations.

3.6. Data Analysis

To enhance the clarity of the study findings, the collected data was subjected to cleaning to check for missing or inconsistent data. This ensures that the data set is ready for analysis.

Descriptive statistics was used to summarize the main features of the data set. It involves the measures of central tendencies, variation and percentages. The collected data was presented in clear and concise using tables, figures and narratives to ensure a clear presentation of findings. The interpretation of data was in the context of the research questions and was discussed based on its implications and significance.

Moreover, median-scores are calculated as the average of all the on-scale scores of all responding on-scale with 5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest. The researchers will use tables and figures to present the gathered data.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative technique used to identify patterns and emerging themes within qualitative textual data obtained from open-ended questions of the semi-structured questionnaire and participant observation (as in the case of this study).

4. Results

The results of the analysis demonstrate that UPLB student council organizations exhibit a programmatic orientation strongly aligned with SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, reflecting a normative commitment to social justice, institutional accountability, and human rights within their advocacy frameworks. This alignment is not incidental but structurally embedded within the historical and political consciousness of the University of the Philippines student movement, which operationalizes sustainability through a politically-engaged, justice-centered lens rather than a purely environmental or technocratic one. Thematic analysis of first-semester activities (AY 2024–2025) reveals recurrent nodal campaigns—Student Rights and Welfare Week, Peasants’ Month, No to Jeepney Phaseout, and Free Palestine solidarity—each serving as discursive and mobilizational platforms that explicitly link local socioecological struggles (e.g., land reform, transport equity, academic freedom) to global SDG indicators, thereby localizing the SDG framework within Philippine political ecology. College-specific variations in SDG emphasis reflect disciplinary embeddedness: for example, the College of Human Ecology Student Council prioritized SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 16, mirroring its interdisciplinary focus on human-environment systems, while the College of Agriculture and Food Science Student Council concentrated on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 1 (No Poverty), contextualizing sustainability through agrarian and rural development imperatives.

Collaborative dynamics further reveal a polycentric governance structure, wherein student councils engage with political interest groups (e.g., Sakbayan, Anakbayan) and alliance formations (e.g., Rise for Education Alliance, YAPJUST) to amplify advocacy impact. This network functions as a *de facto* pressure node ecosystem, consistent with Robert Dahl’s interest-group theory, yet distinguished by a coexistence rather than competition model, wherein organizations synchronize campaigns to maximize institutional and public resonance. However, survey data indicate moderate SDG awareness levels among council respondents (median = 3 on a 5-point Likert scale), with knowledge acquisition pathways dominated by formal education and NGO engagements—a finding that suggests informational diffusion but not necessarily critical integration of SDG interdependencies. Structural impediments were salient across councils, notably: fiscal constraints limiting project scalability, administrative inertias within university bureaucracies, impact measurement deficits due to absent monitoring & evaluation frameworks, and ideological resistances that polarize sustainability discourse along partisan lines.

Qualitative thematics further reveal a conceptual narrowing of sustainability toward environmental dimensions (e.g., waste management, plastic reduction), overshadowing its social, economic, and governance pillars—a reflex of both curricular biases and campaign pragmatism. In response, the study proposes a hybrid institutions framework, adapted from German and Keeler (2010), which envisions collaborative interfaces between student councils, interest groups, and administrative bodies to co-produce sustainability initiatives. This model advocates for: (1) leveraging the UPLB Learning Resource Center as an SDG pedagogical hub; (2) transcending ideological rigidities in alliance-building to foster cross-sectoral cooperation; and (3) instituting ESG (Environmental-Social-Governance) accounting mechanisms, in partnership with the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, to systematically evaluate and enhance the sustainability performance of student organizations. Ultimately, while UPLB student councils are active agents of SDG

localization, their long-term efficacy depends on transitioning from ad-hoc advocacy to embedded, metrics-informed, and institutionally-hybridized sustainability governance

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